
POETRY | FALL 2023

Ballad of a Harlem Boy

By Phyllis Capello

“Let him go,” his mother told the nurse.

Raised on the uptown asphalt shore of the Hudson, his family’d just moved to the Jersey side that spring; (to keep him safe) said his mother. Their first trip back to visit grandma, he hooked up with a school pal and off they went on scooters to navigate the steamy streets; thousands of citizens streaming up 135th, down Lenox; floating past projects, bodegas, vendors—‘til that moment someone mistook him for someone else.

I heard this story from the nurse who bathed him that terrible day Oh, weep, weep til the streets are waterfalls!

No Justin at a new school gate this fall; backpack stuffed with this year’s version of yesterday’s facts; no mention of how a battlefield can be just outside a grandmother’s window,

or that a maddened neighbor-boy might be aiming a shiny new gun.

(the nurse said: even a black boy will whiten if his blood runs like rivers.)

Oh, Justin, east and west! Let wild eddies whim themselves back and forth across the river, let the north and south of your ghost-body be made whole—
if only in this current of words:

a child missing friends, a family adrift between stories; a city-turned-suburban-boy; every mother’s son
on a scooter; rivers of avenues, gliding
past concrete islands of traffic lights

that somehow sense that because a sweet swift heart is sailing the crossroads instantly change themselves to green, green, green.

Phyllis Capello, who is a writer and musician, is a NYFA fellow in fiction I and a winner of an Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award. Her collection *Packs Small Plays Big* is from Bordighera Press, 2018. Cantastoria work (sing/storyteller) has taken her from Ireland-to-Istanbul. She has presented at the International Oral History Conference in Rome, Italy and has been a musician/clown since 1990 with Healthy Humor Red Nose Docs, as well as a member of the poetry/activist trio, Ferlinghetti Girls. In 2023 she was honored with People's Hall of Fame Award for teaching artistry for her work in New York City schools.

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